

## Introduction

In the 2010 movie *Black Swan*, Nina Sayers is filmed repeatedly practicing a specific ballet turn after her teacher mentioned her need for improvement earlier that day. Played by Natalie Portman, Nina is shown spinning in her room at home, sweating with desperation and determination trying to execute the turn perfectly. Despite the hours of gruesome rehearsal, Nina must nail every single aspect of this particular turn to fully embody the role she is cast in. After several attempts at the move, she falls, exhausted, clutching her newly twisted ankle in agony. Perfection, as shown in this case, runs hand in hand with pain. Crying to herself, Nina holds her freshly hurt ankle and contemplates how far she will go to mold her flesh into the perfectly obedient body.

This is just one example in the movie *Black Swan* in which the main character Nina, chases perfection. Based on the demanding world of ballet, Darren Aronofsky creates a new-age portrayal of the life of a young ballet dancer, faced with the harsh obstacles of stardom. Labeled as a “psychological thriller” and horror film, *Black Swan* tries to capture Nina’s journey in becoming the lead of the ever-popular “Swan Lake.” However, being that the movie is set in modern times, the show is not about your usual ballet. Expecting the predictable “Black Swan” plot, the ballet attendees are thrown off by the twists and turns created by this mental version of the show they thought they knew. Similarly, the attendees for the movie *Black Swan* were surprised at the risks Aronofsky took to create this haunting masterpiece.

With a domestic total gross of over \$100,000,000, five Oscar nominations, and a “Best Actress” win at the Grammy’s, *Black Swan* was undoubtedly a commercial success. However, many people never question why a movie of this genre is so successful

in America. Although obvious choices were made to make the movie unique, the answer lies with the audience and how the movie was interpreted. Unsure of the lucidity of the main character, reviews of the movie question: “Is Nina paranoid or persecuted?” (Corliss).

Known for creating controversial films in the past such as *Requiem for a Dream*, Aronofsky went about directing this movie just as he had with his previous works. Pairing insanity with beauty, he mentions incorporating revered musical pieces by artists such as Tchaikovsky in the background of scenes. He claims, “it was insane. We knew it was going to that next level, that it was going to push people” (Shone). The film creates a conflict in the minds of the audience members by contrasting themes of black and white analogous to insanity and beauty. Throughout the movie Nina feels the push and pull of letting go while simultaneously obeying the orders of her teacher, mother, and society.

Throughout every person’s life, there are multiple authority figures that are superior to his or her place in civilization. As theorist Michel Foucault noted: ranging from parents, teachers, bosses, and all the way to government officials, there is always a power struggle between humans and the restraints of authority. He questions, “Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?” (Foucault *Discipline and Punish* 228). He suggests that human beings are a part of larger systems based off of control and obedience seen in every sphere of an individual’s life. Such interest in the reformation of prisoners’ souls sparked an interest with “the disciplinary systems that exist beneath the surface of middle-class society and control our behavior without our knowledge” (Foss, Foss, & Trapp 214).

Rules and regulations influence how one behaves in certain social situations. Workers are required to come to work dressed appropriately, on time, sit at a certain desk, and follow the orders of their superiors. In certain offices, workers are even distributed between the floors of the building in regards to their status in the company. The bosses of such companies are hidden from view in their luxuriously sized offices, while the lower level employees are in structured cubicles following orders. In sum, there is a constant power force in every domain of an individual's life that sets boundaries on behavior.

It is quite obvious that rules are necessary for mayhem to be avoided at work, in school, and in life generally. However, there is a fine line between coercion and obedience. It is plausible to have order in classrooms and work settings so that productivity is constant. When it comes to ballet, the maintenance of body weight through the means of starvation serves as a clear example of how obedience can be taken to an extreme. Ballet dancers feel the need to maintain a certain glorified figure in order to gain success in their industry. After watching fellow dancers get cut or fired from performances, it is only in human nature for ballerinas to avoid the paths that their former dancers have taken. Through common sense, each dancer learns that eating too much food will cause weight gain, and in turn, will result in termination of their position in their dance company.

In order to understand the need to satisfy the demands of authority, one must go deeper into the mind of the obedient. It is necessary to understand that every person is subjected to the guidelines created by authority figures. In addition, "do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same: leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order" (Foucault *The Archaeology of Knowledge* 17). Therefore, it

is in human nature to strive for whatever one desires. The pressure to be compliant forced upon each individual in society places personal desires further down as priorities. Consequently, there is a clash between how one is told to act, dress, behave, etc. and one's personal desires for how to live their life. There is rarely a common ground between personal desires and those of authority.

“Perfection” is defined as the condition, state, or quality of being free or as free as possible from all flaws or defects. This is the primary goal for ballerinas; to have the perfect form, body, and execution. In order to create this perfection, one must be trained to be obedient from a young age. As infants, we are all scolded after partaking in bad actions or habits so as to set boundaries for what is approved in our culture and what is not. Our parents help shape our ethics, morals, etc. so that when we are in the world alone, we rarely have to hesitate when we have to make the correct choice. This plants the seed of Foucauldian thought, “Sovereignty is exercised within the borders of a territory, discipline is exercised on the bodies of individuals, and security is exercised over a whole population” (Foucault *Security, Territory, Population* 48). □However, the subtle restrictions placed on humans from birth are most interestingly related to those placed on ballerinas.

In the world of ballet, much of the same aspects in classrooms are seen in a dance class. There is a teacher, and the students who follow directions and apply concepts taught by the authority figure. Obviously no teacher is perfect. However, many teach as if perfection is within reach. Every student begins the class with a 100% grade, which is in fact perfect. However, there is one component missing to that perfection: the person. It is in human nature to make mistakes and learn from them. 100% grades on tests are

possible, however there is no one who has never missed any questions on every test they have taken. In the end, students are presented with their final grade, which is basically a symbol of how many mistakes they made to tarnish the original “A.”

In order to create the submissive student, teachers incorporate certain strategies in their teaching regimen. Michel Foucault states in *Discipline and Punish*, ““There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations” (Foucault *Discipline and Punish* 464). This can be transferred into the educational sphere allowing teachers to become that source of power. “Gold stars” are a form of tangible reward that many students are given after performing a certain way, or demonstrating proficiency in the classroom. This is done to maintain such behavior and motivate all students to follow suit. In opposition, “pulling cards” are the result of unwanted behavior in the classroom and are distributed to maintain order and hinder other students from deviating from expected behaviors. In *Black Swan*, there are many parallels to these punishments and rewards that lead to the concept of docility.

Although the works of Foucault have been based off of civilizational studies dating back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the arguments still fit the culture our world is shaped by today. By studying Bentham’s Panopticon, Foucault elaborates on disciplinary theories stating, “a schema of exceptional discipline to one of the generalized surveillance, rests on a historical transformation: the gradual extension of the mechanisms of discipline throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, their spread throughout the whole social body, the formation of what might be called in general: the disciplinary society.” (Foucault *Discipline and Punish* 473). In response, civilization uses these methods to

create order among the population. Each century undergoes this process, the differences lie in the methods used to create that order in response to the infrastructure and technological advances available at that time.

As a basis for the regulations humans face in their lives, Foucault studied the nature of “governing rules.” These rules determine “the gestures, behaviors, and circumstances that accompany speakers as they talk; these rituals reflect the meaning of the discourse” (Foss et al., 219). His reference to religious discourse confers that certain clothing is necessary to deem oneself as legitimate in whatever role they attain. Ballerinas are expected to exemplify the typical dancer in their clothing, movements, and body to appear professional.

The concept of human obedience is weaved throughout society, making rebelliousness almost impossible. In the movie *Black Swan*, the notion of the “docile body” is demonstrated through the main character, Nina Sayers. As one of the few movies to enter into this subject matter, *Black Swan* is “maddening, uneven, often bonkers, but it's also often strangely beautiful” (*Rotten Tomatoes*). Audience members find themselves conflicted with how to deal with the film they had previously witnessed. The constant connection of the Foucauldian “docile body” theory in *Black Swan* stirs a reaction in the American public, instigating an awareness of social obedience, and a move towards individuality and change.

## **Foucault and the Body**

Known in his time as a philosopher, idealist, and historian, Michel Foucault created the base of his studies analogous to the works of the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. Always interested in the study of human thought, Foucault argues the co-dependent relationship between knowledge and power. Parting from the judicial views of power as a human right, he claims power is “employed and exercised through a net-like organization...individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in a position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power” (Foss et al., 224). In order to express the means to which power is exercised, Foucault contends that surveillance, files, and reports are created to classify and judge the standards for correct behavior. One would believe that such tactics would be obvious and rejected in modern culture. However, supporting the success of such power, Foucault argues that this power is subtle yet pervasive, making the governed unaware of the extent to which they are influenced.

Centering his studies on humanities and theoretical concepts, in one of his books, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Foucault introduces two concepts that can be applied today. The notion of punishing human bodies is classified into two separate forms: monarchical punishment and disciplinary punishment.

Beginning with the public execution of Robert-François Damiens in 1757 after the attempted murder of Louis XV, Foucault struck an interest with how convicts in France were punished. This interest then began to evolve with the periodical changes in the forms of capital punishment over time. Noting that citizens gathered in the center of town for executions, Foucault began to gain theoretical perspective on the motives behind

the desire to witness such events. After analyzing the prison systems over time, he began to create a modern theory of punishment that he proceeded to explain in the rest of his book.

Disciplinary punishment can be explained as the constant surveillance over the human population by means of professional authority. These “professionals” can be parole officers, policemen, psychologists, teachers, etc. However, the main difference between that of disciplinary and monarchical punishment is that disciplinary punishment leads to the eventual duty of managing one’s own body. Since monarchical forms of punishment are less common in modern society, the restriction and regulations of humans becomes elusive.

Rooted in the management and organization of prison systems, a new form of discipline arose from the studies of Foucault centering on knowledge and power. Rather than having the focus on individual and innate qualities of humans, authority figures “mold” people into the obedient versions of themselves. More “behind the scenes” than monarchical punishment, disciplinary focuses on the less direct form of authorial influences. As discussed in his book, Foucault mentions the development of prisons systems over time based on the way order is maintained. Foucault argues that the more visibility an authority figure has over the individual, the more likely it is that the person will be watched and influenced by authority over time. In turn, “the effectiveness of power increases as its visibility decreases” (Foss et al., 225).

Through the example of Jeremy Bentham’s “Panopticon” design for prisons, Foucault creates a parallel between daily life and the invisible authority figure. The Bentham prison comparison mentions a sole prison guard watching over multiple inmates



while remaining unseen. This mode of regulation allowed for Foucault to develop his main topic of study: the carceral.

Although containing many separate facets in explanation, the carceral theory can be understood quite simply. Through the pairing of delinquency and docility, inmates were subjected to a gradual shaping of behaviors until the “norm” was established again. Through this continual change, punishment is accepted as a means to regulate prisoners and keep each individual within the “norm.” This “norm” is established by the authority and becomes the basis for all judgments of human behavior. Consequently, humans begin to subject their body to fit the standard. This is where Foucault begins to expand his research into society. By now identifying the authorial figures one deals with every day, the notion of carceral bodies begins to reemerge, stressing the capture of the human bodies under superior observation.

Channeling the disciplinary actions taken in the confines of the prison system, Foucault argues that we cannot choose to enter into modern society. The technologies of power control every human being while everyone is under the impression of possessing personal freedom. He claims that people are in the form of docile bodies, “ones that may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved. And this docile body can only be achieved through strict regiment of disciplinary acts” (Foucault *Discipline and Punish* 136). In turn, the body is no longer the object to which punishment is placed but the “instrument of punishment.” Slowly but surely, every superior power strips human of their rights so as to maintain constant order and obedience.

The main concepts of the “docile body” can be broken down into three separate stages. The first step is the increase of control put on the body from the power source.

Next, the control is perfected in a more sophisticated sense. Last, the control becomes a constant, and eventually the “norm” for the individual. The norm is created to harvest efficient and time-conscious individuals. The three stages can be applied to not only prison systems, but also to organizations in our daily lives. According to Foucault, we all enter a machinery of power that explores our bodies until they are broken down and rearranged into a political anatomy. In turn, people are not seen as individuals through legal, psychological, and social constructs, but rather as pawns that can be moved around at will.

Just as seen in the prison systems, the time/efficiency factor plays into the classroom. Revealing the positive side of this theory, Foucault claims, “What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn’t only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it transverses and produces things, forms knowledge, and produces discourse” (Foucault *Discipline and Punish* 127). From a young age, children are taught to sit still in certain assigned seats and to raise their hand before speaking. Even practicing cursive demonstrates a proficient mode of writing that physically saves time in order for more work to be completed.

In conclusion, we are literally trained from the first organization we belong to, to follow orders or be punished. Regarding the docile body theory, humans must never be idle or useless; they must “correlate the body with the gesture” (Foucault *Discipline and Punish* 152). Consequently, as muscle memory occurs in athletes, obedience becomes a subconscious quality that is stamped among humans.

## **The World of Ballet**

We are told from a young age that practice makes perfect. In ballet, it may as well be the driving force behind every dancer. Through the surveillance of dancers, the Foucauldian theory of the docile body can be implemented to create control. Just as prisoners eventually fall into the norms created by the power systems that imprison them, ballet dancers are trained every day to normalize the movements practiced in the dance studio. In addition, a steady maintained diet, dress, and spot-on technique are necessary to succeed.

Dancers line up along a wooden bar with mirrors surrounding the center of the room. In addition, dancers are expected to follow a specific dress code to appear uniform and unified. The placement of the mirrors is significant in the sense that each individual dancer is always aware of his or her appearance. The mirrors allow for self-regulation and correction of ballet techniques done by the dancer and/or the instructor. The mirrors serve as the panoptic eyes that control the docility of every body in the room.

Professional ballerinas are those who have grown up in dance studios, under the constant analysis of their dance instructors. It is only within human nature to strive for approval of those in power because of the tangible or intangible rewards. Once the difficulty level of ballet is at its peak, the years of scrutiny and control kick in and the learned behaviors of obedience stem from the individual.

In ballet, dancers take their bodily control to another level. Due to constant criticism and rules given by the dance instructor, ballerinas tend to lose their individual desires and replace them with that of the “norm.” Dancers are expected to appear

flawless, petite, and graceful. In order to create this persona, other techniques are implemented, taking self-monitoring to an extreme.

In order to establish approval from superiors, dancers turn the critique onto themselves, attempting to morph their bodies into the lean figure of a star ballerina. The turn of criticism is rooted from the constant corrections given out by dance instructors over the dancer's lifetime. Once the ballerina reaches young adulthood and puberty sets in, the comments about the perfect form not only constitute the dance moves ballerinas must complete, but also physical appearance. If a dancer in her teenage years begins to put on obvious weight, the instructor in charge is forced to confront the dancer. In ballet, there are no flaws; and flaws are permanently paired with overweight dancers.

One prominent feature that can be seen often in modern ballet is the presence of eating disorders. In order to maintain an almost "fat-free" body, drastic measures must be taken. Approximately 46% of female professional ballerinas suffered from some form of an eating disorder in 1997 (*New York Times*). The numbers today have skyrocketed, along with the strategies used by dancers to cover up their tracks from engaging in certain eating disordered behaviors.

At such a young age, ballerinas "grow up confused about the body and its functions and are deficient in their sense of identity, autonomy, and control. In many ways, they feel and behave as if they have no independent rights, that neither their body, nor their actions are self-directed" (Caskey 180). In order to create the slim figure needed to perform on stage, many ballerinas turn to disordered eating. The lack of independence many ballerinas face stems from earlier years of development. "A child growing up in an extremely enmeshed system learns to subordinate the self. Her expectation from a goal-

directed activity...is therefore not competence, but approval” (Caskey 182). Therefore, ballerinas transform the “control” concept of Foucault to apply regulation of their own bodies to fit the norms created by their superiors.

This shows that most ballerinas give their body- and partially their mind- to the art of ballet. Once a loss of self is in action, ballerinas can become robotic, obedient, and docile. Always under the ridicule of society, dancers follow orders and mold their body and minds into what they perceive as perfection.

Ballerinas who suffer from disordered eating “view their bodies as reflected images of the desire of others, as exterior, and as foreign. They are observers rather than participants in their own physical being” (Caskey 179). In other words, ballerinas feel as if their bodies are under the control of a higher power. This can easily be seen in the way dance classes are arranged along with the aforementioned regulation of body weight. Dancers are constantly following orders and remaining obedient. If not, they are no longer allowed to be a part of the world of ballet. In simple terms, follow orders or you are rejected. Just as in the world of dancing, certain societal spheres encompass this notion of authority and rejection.

Not only does every person suffer the stifling of personal aspirations, but the bulk of such suppression is placed upon females. In ballet, the female body is made to accentuate femininity in its presentation on stage. This is shown through the posture and framework in each dance move created with the typical slender ballerina physique. The steps taken to create this persona actually clash with the biological factors that define women. As noted in *The Female Body in Western Culture*, “with the way the female physiognomy works, body fat and menstruation are intimately connected,” and “fat

becomes a division of labor where sexually determined body differences become indicators of status” (Caskey 177). Therefore, the natural bodily function of menstruation- that which defines women- is being suppressed as a result of outside pressures. As Foucault noted, “the body is seen as a passive entity upon which power stamps its own images,” (McNay 12). which leaves no autonomy or individual experience. The aforementioned “rules” that Foucault noted in religious groups, could be directly applied to the way a ballerina is viewed. The more fat that is present on the body of a dancer, the less professional they seem.

### **Black Swan**

“I had the craziest dream last night...” The first words spoken in the 2010 movie *Black Swan* immediately function to gather the attention of audience members through their involvement in the main character’s subconscious. Throughout this psychological thriller, the audience is tossed back and forth between actual events, and those that have been conjured up in the mind of Nina Sayers, played by Natalie Portman.

Serving as the main hub of Foucauldian analysis in this groundbreaking film, Nina plays a young ballerina in New York, desperately seeking the spotlight amongst her fellow dancers. In the course of the film, Nina is transformed from the docile, obedient dancer to the psychotic, split-personality version of herself. Throughout the constant push and pull to follow orders while in turn “losing” herself, Nina helps uncover a depiction of Foucauldian concepts. By demonstrating the effects of the “docile body” theory, *Black Swan* exposes the damages power pressures can impose on just one individual, causing the American public to begin to question how much control they have in their own lives. In addition, the movie gained such popularity because the main character challenges her

pressure to conform, while still appearing obedient. This reveals the power humans have to fight back to such pressures, creating a nation-wide reaction of interest for the film.

Forcing the issue to creep into the movie from the beginning, Aronofsky introduces Nina's mother as the initial form of outside pressure she must deal with every day. Only within the first twenty minutes, a cut is shown on Nina's shoulder blade. Immediately noted by her mother, she proceeds to cover it up with a sweater. Referred to by her mother as a "sweet" girl over the course of the movie, Nina is expected to behave and act as a child, always under the orders of her mother and teachers. In ballet, it is not acceptable to have any flaws, especially if one is seeking the approval of a teacher. Paired with Nina's reaction to her mother spotting her injury, the audience realizes that she is aware of her cut, and must not let it show. Nothing can get in the way of her success.

The following scene adds more apprehension to the feel of the movie, when Nina is shown on a subway mistaking another woman in a reflection as herself. This serves as a direct link to Foucault's studies symbolizing the disconnect Nina feels from her actual body. In watching herself from a different perspective (that of a bystander), she gains a different point of view and begins to see herself as an individual. This discovery leads to the motivation to uncover who that person could be.

The scenes that show ballerinas in the dance studio feature certain camera filming techniques that help to highlight the synchronicity of dancers. This can therefore link to Foucault's initial study of prison systems. Just as ballerinas line up in straight lines and dance in unison, prisoners are directed around the prison according to a specific schedule and formation. In addition, the "Panopticon" design for prisons focuses on the supervision of prisoners done by a hidden overseer or higher authority. In the set-up of

the ballet studio, the director of the ballet stands on a platform above the dancers, slightly hidden from view. In this way, the dancers can be viewed without their knowledge, and the director can note any modifications in their dress, movement, etc. he plans to enforce in the future. Just as a prison guard pays attention to flaws in the daily schedule and formations of the prisoners, ballet teachers pay close attention to the ballerinas both as individuals and simultaneously as a system.

Nina's teacher and director in the movie, played by Thomas Leroy, serves a dual purpose in leading Nina to full subservience while still encouraging a rebellious nature that the Black Swan embodies. This parallels with the two options audience members have after the conclusion of the film. One can either choose to ignore the concept of "docility" that Aronofsky introduces or use it as a foundation to discover new ways to preserve individuality among power pressures.

Early on in the film, Nina meets with the director to discuss her future in the company following an "almost perfect" audition for the lead in the next production. Thomas alludes to Foucauldian insight when he claims that Nina must "lose herself" in order to embody the Black Swan. She is already noted as "beautiful, fearful, and fragile." It is in her nature to dance the obedient and secure part of the White Swan, but the role is dually demanding, requiring characteristics of the Black Swan to weave into her personal life. In the discussion between the two characters, Thomas asks Nina why she has put herself through so much discipline to gain basically nothing. In the more competitive sphere of ballet, "blending in" is not a desirable quality in the search for the lead of a production.



Just as Foucault touches on the lack of resistance shown in the docile body theory, Nina signifies a prime example of individualized Foucauldian assertions. Using a desire for perfection as an excuse for the meeting, Nina shows her loss of individuality, even at a young adult age where development of self is necessary. As Foucault stresses, "...if you are not like everybody else, then you are abnormal, if you are abnormal, then you are sick. These three categories, not being like everybody else, not being normal, and being sick are in fact very different but have been reduced to the same thing" (Pol-Droit). The ultimate goal of the docile body theory is just this: to find the flaws in a system and morph them into controllable parts, making every individual lose distinctive assets and become a cohesive, manageable whole.

Insisting on bringing those qualities out, Thomas proceeds to kiss Nina in the confines of his office. In response Nina bites his lip, showing the rebellious fire that the Black Swan represents. He wants her to surprise herself and the audience through transcendence that many do not acquire. Culturally today, power pressures stifle that transcendence, serving as the basis as to why Aronofsky would create such a film. Aronofsky has to depict the personal struggle of a young dancer against the higher powers of society. He demonstrates this by allowing the audience into the mind of the main character. In that way, the audience views her struggle as his or her own. In the end, Nina's attempts seem successful in her mind. However, she has so fully converted into a split-minded version of the Black Swan that the story has become her life.

After the meeting has ended abruptly with Nina leaving the office, the roles for the production are presented for the dancers to view. Nina –after being told she had not received the part of the Black Swan- finds herself stunned to have actually become the

lead. Because this casting was immediately following her encounter with Thomas, Nina is reluctant to accept full responsibility for her rewards. However, this unexpected twist ignites a spark in the minds of those watching, demonstrating that rebelliousness can lead to positive outcomes. Obedience may not always be the best path to take.

Quickly following the scene where Nina finds out she is the lead, she proceeds to the bathroom to call her mother and tell her the news. Excitement fills the room harmonized with menacing music in the background only to further the good/bad archetypes we see throughout the movie. Ending the phone call with her mother, Nina exits the stall to see “whore” written in lipstick on the bathroom mirror. The author of this note remains hidden. However, the supposed vandals all serve different metaphorical purposes.

One may assume it is a hallucination of Nina’s subconscious due to the constant battle between her split personalities. Her superego, docile side has been etched in her brain for so many years that the guilt created from attaining the lead role seeps through into her conscious, attempting to restrain her again. However, the other option leads one to think the prior lead in the production wrote the slander on the mirror. Earlier in the film, Nina had witnessed the previous “Black Swan” lead get fired. Always admiring her dancing, Nina continued into the lead’s dressing room in order to feel what she believed to be as “perfection.” As a memento from that moment (and a motivational tool) Nina takes a tube of lipstick from the dressing room. This draws the connection to Nina’s casting as the lead later on in the movie.

Celebrating her victory, Nina heads home to see her mother as the new Swan Queen. Noticing the scrape on her back, Nina begins to worry about her body.

Furthermore, Nina is offered a slice of cake from her mother, which she in turn, refuses. Her mother reacts with such vehemence that the audience gets to see the pressure Nina faces to keep herself in the approval of her superiors. And that pressure does not only pertain to Nina's ballet, but also the confines of her home.

Bodily maintenance is one of the most talked about topics pertaining to ballet. Females are expected to have an unhealthily slim body, in order to perfect movements and remain easily mobile for the male dancers to guide. Foucault, in his analysis of the body, talks about the feminine form in much detail. Building off of Foucault, McNay states that, "the social is able to make sexual forms seem obvious and thereby hide oppressive systems... and, thus, perpetuate the myth of immutable feminine qualities" (McNay 22). Consequently, through the starvation of the female body, the societal view of femininity is exposed in ballet to the extreme while simultaneously keeping the means to achieve such "beauty" concealed.

Like puppets to a puppeteer, dancers in ballet seek the reassurance of their director in every move they make. So, in order to capture the role of the Black and White Swan, Nina must fully gain the approval of her teacher. The story enacted in the ballet depicts a girl trapped in the body of a white swan, searching desperately for freedom. Just as the girl is a prisoner to her bodily form, individuals in the docile body theory find themselves robotic to the commands of authority powers. Conforming as a mass rather than thinking as individuals, humans, in the mind of Foucault, lose that sense of freedom and develop obedience. *Black Swan* gives audience members a sense of hope by demonstrating that the White Swan is still in search of freedom. Therefore, as we are

under the control of higher powers, Aronofsky ignites a spark among the public allowing his film to serve as a standard to judge the obedience we have fallen victim to.

Serving as a foil to Nina, Mila Kunis's character, Lily, stands as a symbol of the "free spirit" many of the other dancers in the movie cannot be. By developing the character of Lily, Aronofsky creates a parallel between Lily and Nina along with the Black and White Swan. Lily serves as the direct opposite character of Nina, to allow audience members to retain hope in the examples of subservience that we all experience in the world today. Sporting a large back tattoo, her character maintains her individuality despite conformity pressures exuded in the ballet world. Lily is shown as the only character that stands out, creating a link between her character and autonomy.

At the rehearsal for the lead role in the twisted version of "Swan Lake," Nina performs flawlessly in front of her fellow dancers. With a clear expression of desperation, her teacher notices how hard Nina is working to gain his approval. This is where the character of the teacher and Lily work together to create a split minded version of Nina. She becomes the desired subject who obeys the commands of her superiors, yet embodies the rebellious nature of the Black Swan simultaneously. Aronofsky illustrates a character that can beat the Foucauldian imprisonment through deceitful tractability. An awareness of power influences allows Nina to feel the power of freedom through imitating the Black Swan. However, unlike Lily, Nina was raised under constant constraints of authority and has never experienced life guided by her own individual decisions and actions. In turn, Nina cannot embody both the White and Black Swan and survive without losing her identity. In the end, this identity loss wins over, and the story of "The Black Swan" leads to Nina's downfall and eventual death.

Following the pre-production party for the ballet, Nina is asked to accompany Thomas to his apartment. Unsure of how to deal with the situation, she obliges, and they head over to have a drink. Startling Nina from the beginning, Thomas begins to ask very intimate, sexual questions. He then gives her a homework assignment that is related to such sexual innuendos. Nina once again finds herself indecisive on how to act. As an authority figure, she must follow whatever Thomas asks of her. However, the assignment given to her seems out of character for herself and as a ballerina. Audience members can then see how one particular individual deals with the battle between superiors and morals.

Growing worse over the course of the film, Nina's scratch on her back serves as a symbol to the character of the Black Swan. The scratch serves to represent the tendency for humans' primal instinct to stand out and be noticed. In order to express individuality, certain likes, dislikes, hobbies, etc. are created to form a personality. Nina has been told her whole life what to do and has now been given the opportunity to take on a disobedient, evil role that she can make her own. Her scrape shows that her true self is attempting to reveal itself, but the efforts of her mother to hide it are too powerful.

After a night of emotional drainage, Nina heads to her first practice as the Swan Queen with her subjects. She walks in to find out that the previous lead in the production, Beth, has been hit by a car and is in critical condition. Shown as a model for the perfect execution of the role of the Black Swan, Beth was the oxymoronic docile rebel that society tries so hard to avoid. Since she achieved this, Aronofsky attempts to demonstrate that it is merely temporary. Assuming her car accident was attempted suicide, the audience is introduced to the dedication and power that ballerinas give to their roles. Once the ability to "let go" is achieved, it is too much to handle combined with the

docility of the obedient dancer. Therefore, Beth has to end her life, just as the White Swan does in the play.

Showing that the rebellious nature of humans leads to ultimate personal downfalls, audience members begin to once again question if they have the determination to fight back against societal pressures and conformity. Driven by dark impulses, Beth was seen as the master of the Black Swan, while Nina masters the White. Nina's teacher finds boredom in her dancing as the White Swan, while in contrast gaining excitement when watching Beth as the Black Swan. Stating that he could not "tear his eyes away" from Beth, Thomas is indicating that a certain degree of insanity is required to capture an audience in this role. Aronofsky parallels this in the creation of the movie *Black Swan*, by pairing the composed beauty of ballet with the dark impulsive side of humans, making audience members unable to "tear their eyes away" (*Rotten Tomatoes*). Consequently, the reviews for the movie claim an unstated addictive quality to the film, that causes a riff in the minds of particularly docile humans.

In her desperate search for approval, Nina finds herself visiting the hospital room of the former Swan Queen after her car accident. Uncovering the sheets, the camera focuses in on the horrid injuries the former ballerina suffered from her accident. Feeling somewhat responsible for this loss of sanity, Nina flees the hospital and is faced with a decision. She runs to the only place that feels home to her: the ballet studio. She proceeds to sit down, as the filming captures the resolute stare Nina so calmly and eerily holds. It is then prevalent that she is willing to take the risk of becoming the dual part of the Swan Queen. Igniting the reckless fire within her, Nina continues to make life-altering choices that help her natural instincts reveal herself. In her mind, she is in control of her dreams

and actions, whereas Foucault would note that her presence and acceptance as the Black and White Swan serve as a pawn to a larger conspiracy of control implanted all around us.

Creating a connection between what Aronofsky is trying to convey to the audience, Thomas, Nina's teacher, works to slowly bring out her inner Black Swan. In this way, Aronofsky can represent the workings of Foucault by metaphorically demonstrating the docile body concept and instilling it into the minds of others. Although aware of Nina's downfall after rebelling against authority, Aronofsky's main goal is to spark interest in such ideas. In that way, individuality is preserved, and dominance is seen as unstable. In regards to *Black Swan*, people are introduced to a certain idea or theory that is somewhat hidden in this modern day controversial film.

Intertwining the efforts of Nina's teacher with the character of Lily, Aronofsky portrays the unraveling of the young dancer's sanity. The additional encounters Nina faces with her teacher or with Lily correspond to her improvement as the role of the Black Swan, along with her loss of self. Persistently called "weak" and being told to not apologize anymore, Nina is forced to fight back. However, through the demonstrative application of the docile body theory, one can see that society does not allow a quiet rupture in the calm and organized culture that has evolved from the pressures of authority.

Nina pursues the chase of "imperfection" by living vicariously through her fellow dancer's debauchery. The night before her rehearsal, Nina goes out for drinks with Lily and "lives a little" by taking ecstasy with strangers she meets at the bar. The night slowly begins to spiral out of control as Nina's mother repeatedly calls her cell phone wondering where she is. Acting as a restricting force, Nina's mother attempts to control her

daughter's actions and choices. The suspense in the movie rises as the struggle between the archetypal battle of dark and light ensues.

Not until later that night does the audience begin to seriously question Nina's sanity. After a supposed "sleepover" with Lily, Nina begins to morph even further into her id-driven tendencies. One of these examples is the sexual encounter Nina has with Lily after the club. Waking up late for her rehearsal with drunken memories from the night before, Nina is unable to remember what actually happened. The scene flashes with images highlighting the Black Swan tattoo on Lily's back. She morphs back and forth as the two dancers, creating a physical parallel between the dual part of the Swan Queen and the transformation Nina is undergoing.

The more she caves into such antics, the more it becomes apparent that the Black Swan is in control of the White Swan. Just as Nina had "fire" in her to help her ignite the passion within, it also shows that there is still a fight left for everyone, no matter how hard to locate. Lily, on the other hand shows success in faking docility in the ballet studio. As Foucault clarifies, "ordinary people who have knowledge of their circumstances are able to express themselves independently of the universal theorizing intellectual." (Foucault *Discipline and Punish* 126). After being cast as the alternate, she is the literal counterpart to Nina in the movie. In creating this shift, Aronofsky uses a Foucauldian stance to show that the only way to fully succeed is to succumb to the power surrounding us. Fighting back may help regain a sense of individuality, but in the end it will be stifled and turned away.

The rest of the movie is characterized by psychotic episodes between characters as seen through the eyes of Nina. A camera shot shows Lily and Thomas in a sexual



embrace only to alter into Nina and the actual Black Swan. At this point the effects of rebelling against her virginal self have fully taken over and put Nina completely in the dark, secluded from everyone.

Desperate to maintain her role, Nina backlashes at her mother's attempts to keep her bedridden. Claiming, "I'm the Swan Queen, you are the one who never left the chorus," Nina alludes to the conformity shown in the prison systems and studies of obedience. By staying in a background role, one is able to preserve their levelheadedness, but there is a lack of personality shadowed by routine movements and compliance. After all the efforts Nina has gone to become one with each of the swan roles, her teacher attempts to motivate her by saying that "the only one standing in her way is herself" and it is time to lose that part. In Nina's submissively trained mind, she takes this advice literally and loses herself to fully embodying the Black Swan and plummeting to her death.

The final scene of the movie shows Nina dancing the part of the Black and White Swan flawlessly. She has finally lost herself. Although it may not seem possible, Nina has fought back to the restraints that have tied her down her whole life. Having fully converted into the Black Swan, evil begins to seep into Nina's actions and motives. In the end of the performance, the White Swan commits suicide. In between sets, Nina stabs herself after she loses full control of her mind. The Black Swan has taken over, and the ending to the ballet serves as the end to Nina's life.

### **Conclusion**

The reviews featured after the release of "Black Swan" followed a similar pattern to the themes that run throughout the movie. Many people claim it is "maddening, uneven,

often bonkers, but also often strangely beautiful” (Bowen). The daunting revealing of the “docile body” in ballet serves as a parallel to the White Swan, creating a connection to real life humans. Aronofsky attempts to portray the oxymoronic “obedient rebel” in hopes of conjuring up the notion of the “docile body” in the mind of the audience members. The whiplash between following orders and following desires unconsciously stirs emotions in moviegoers, unleashing the concept of freedom in the pursuit of personal aspirations. Once people are aware that there are other choices to how they choose to live their lives, an alternate option emerges beside the previous lone option of docility. An undercover concept of authorial influence is rooted in the minds of viewers that creates “a sense of stress and anguish and mad momentum, that’s both exhilarating and terrifying (Long).

Multiple reviews mentioned the nightmare-like quality of the film and the effect it had on the audience. The reasoning behind people “staring zombie-like at the closing credits, unable to move” (Rhodes) was because of the demonstration of obedience shown in the film. People begin to realize that there are authority figures in every sphere of their lives that control their actions to a certain extent. The addicting side of the movie is the incorporation of the rebel Black Swan. This “half” character provides hope for individuality, personal choice, and bodily freedom.

As people watch the movie, their brains peel back the layers that cover up the depth of societal influences. Foucault talks about the dualism of mind and body in regards to the power influences we face in our lives. Over the course of time, society has taught us to put our minds before our bodies. In this way, the prioritization created by our culture “derogates the body as the site of all that is understood to be opposed to the spirit

and rational thought, such as the emotions, passions, needs” (McNay). In turn, thought establishes knowledge and regulates the dialogues that humans choose to interact in.

In allowing our bodies to follow our minds in order of importance, humans lose a sense of self that is needed to establish individuality. Desires must be fulfilled to build character. Yet, regulations of desires and emotions through the control of the human body -seen in the docility model of Foucault- aids as a catalyst to full control of individual bodies. Once the person has placed the concept of his or her body in opposition to their mind, a bond is broken that places any natural human feeling on terms of unimportance. Rationality is deemed key, “opposing, in highly dramatic fashion, the undue privilege modern western culture has accorded subjectivity, sublimation, ideality, and the like” (McNay).

The reactions to *Black Swan* revolve around the terrifying addictiveness it stimulates. Confused in terms of what to do with witnessing such a film, viewers are left with a sense of hopelessness. Nina tries to break the bonds of the restraints in her life, but fails to do so, affirming that “a knowledge untainted by relations of power cannot exist.” (Foss et al, 223).

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